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ABSTRACT

The Business and Education Transition Alliance (BETA) is a model school-to-work transition program that was developed to facilitate the school-to-work transition of at-risk youth in the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado. Among the BETA program's specific goals are the following: increase students' knowledge/understanding of demands of the workplace; provide training in employer-identified technical and employability skills; facilitate positive attitudes toward supervisors and coworkers; link students with postsecondary opportunities (including corporate-sponsored training); and help students acquire/maintain competitive paid employment in career path jobs. The BETA program has seven stages: job and student identification, assessment, and matching; customized/individualized training development; school-based training; school-to-workplace transition; on-the-job training/work-based training; work performance evaluation; and regular employment. School districts wishing to replicate the BETA model are advised to observe the following guidelines: ensure mutual benefit for employers; obtain up-front commitment from businesses to hire program completers; mobilize a team of educators to provide employers with an orientation on employees' learning styles, disabilities, and required accommodations/supports; encourage employer-educator collaboration; and conduct continuous evaluation/quality improvement activities. (MN)

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BUSINESS AND EDUCATION TRANSITION ALLIANCE (BETA): OPENING DOORS TO CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

by Phillip Stroup

"BETA helped me learn to do my best."
—Marvin, electronics assembly—

"I found out about career opportunities I didn't know existed."
—Jon, painter's assistant—

"I gained lots of confidence and a positive attitude."
—La Quita, sales associate, cosmetics—

"I didn't get pushed into a job area. BETA let me choose."
—Lenny, area leader, manufacturing—

"I got lots of practice using tools and solving problems."
—Tiffany, manufacturing—

The U.S. Department of Education's Program Effectiveness Panel has validated the BETA program as a model school-to-work transition program.

The impact of the Business and Education Transition Alliance (BETA) on its former students is reflected by their testimonies. Based on a 3-year evaluation, this year the BETA program has been judged as a model school-to-work transition program by the Program Effectiveness Panel (PEP), the U.S. Department of Education's primary mechanism for the validation of educational program effectiveness. BETA is approved by PEP for use with students who are at-risk, special education and other members of special populations, and postsecondary individuals with disabilities referred by adult service agencies. Individuals with a range of abilities and severity of disabilities can participate in the BETA program. BETA has also been used effectively as a dropout retrieval program. **A complete set of materials (print and video) designed with input from key stakeholders provides replication sites with quality materials to easily implement this outstanding program.**

Results of the PEP evaluation indicate that BETA participants when compared with individuals in the matched comparison group and the national representative sample, scored higher in competitive employment rates, employer satisfaction, and participant satisfaction. Participants in BETA are also less likely to be unemployed and more likely to be working at the same type of job over a period time. One hundred percent (100%) of the participants (n=68) interviewed in the study reported working in competitive paid employment after their involvement with BETA.

This BRIEF highlights the Business and Education Transition Alliance program. It provides a description of BETA and focuses on what educators need to know to work effectively with employers. It presents answers to the following questions: (a) What do educators need to know to create school-business partnerships? (b) How can they win employers' commitment? and (c) What is the process in implementing this school-to-work transition program for at-risk students?

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Background

Effectively educating and preparing students for the world of work, particularly those who are at risk of low achievement, failure, or dropping out of school is one of the challenges that educators face today (Montgomery & Rossi, 1994; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990). As many as 30% of the nation's youth are thought to be 'at risk' in some way (Education Commission of the States, 1988, p. 1). Additionally, thousands of students with disabilities leave high school each year, either by graduation, dropping out, or aging out. During the school year 1991-92, 229,368 students with disabilities exited the educational system (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The majority of individuals with disabilities (D'Amico & Marder, 1991; Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993) and the growing number of at-risk youth (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990) face the challenge of finding gainful employment. While intensive, well-planned vocational training can help bridge the gap between school and work, exposure to the natural work environment (i.e., work-based learning) is critical to successful employment. In assisting all students, particularly those at-risk of failing, in their transition into the world of work, collaboration with schools, employers, agencies, vocational and special education programs, and the community is called for. The Business and Education Transition Alliance is a model program that has forged strong ties with businesses.

BETA's Mission

Through collaboration among educators and in partnership with businesses and adult community agencies, the Business and Education Transition Alliance Program from the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado is a school-to-work transition program that meets the employment needs of at-risk youth, including those with disabilities, as well as the need of employers for well-trained, entry-level employees. The program prepares students to fill specific job openings that have been identified in partner companies. The goals of the BETA program are to:

- increase students' knowledge and understanding about the demands of the workplace;
- provide training in technical and employability (SCANS) skills identified by employers;
- facilitate positive attitudes toward supervisors and coworkers;
- link students with postsecondary oppportunities, including corporate sponsored training; and
- ultimately, acquire and maintain competitive paid employment in career-path jobs.

BETA is a structured in-school and job site apprenticeship program. Exposure to the job environment is critical to obtaining gainful employment. Wagner et al. (1993) report that vocational training that includes work experience increases the probability of employment after high school. The BETA program prepares its students for the world of work by providing:

- **Classroom Learning** (first half of the semester)
  1. Knowledge, skills, behaviors that relate to:
     - world of work, in general, and career clusters
     - the specific job that students are learning about
  2. Assessment of readiness for on-the-job training (OJT)
     - Evaluation of readiness for work-based learning
     - Interview by employer(s)

During the first half of the semester, students learn to:

- fill out job applications correctly,
- prepare for an interview,
- do the things a boss or supervisor will expect for a particular job or career cluster,
- work with others, and
- apply many other specific job and life survival skills.

- **Structured Work-Based Learning** (second half of the semester)
  1. Work at job site with supervision
  2. Continued contact with BETA teachers
  3. Assessment to determine readiness for regular employment

For those who do well during the first half of the semester, the second nine weeks will be at the job site. Students have the opportunity to:

- practice what they have learned in class by doing the actual job,
- show the employer that they can do a good job, and
- be paid for work.

The Business and Education Transition Alliance provides the climate and instructional support for the development of skills and attitudes necessary for a successful work experience. **Although developed initially for students with disabilities, the concept behind this model program can be used in helping all students to transition successfully to the world of work.**

Program Components

The program should be viewed as a process rather than the mere delivery of a course. The BETA process cycle has seven stages plus a formal evaluation at the end of each cycle that leads into planning for the next cycle. The seven stages are as follows:

1. Job and Student Identification, Assessment, and Matching
2. Customized/Individualized Training Development
3. School-Based Training
4. School-to-Workplace Transition
5. On-the-Job Training (OJT)/Work-Based Training
6. Work Performance Evaluation
7. Regular Employment

Employers have noted they prefer BETA participants to other prospective employees because they arrive on the job pretrained to perform job tasks to the level of mastery acceptable to the employers. Employers' satifaction is a result of the BETA staff successfully designing its curriculum

and instruction that are connected and in context to the realities and skills required at the students' future workplace. Collaboration and commitment by all stakeholders are exhibited throughout the cycle. For example, an employer who asked that students be able to convert standard American measurement to the metric system donated actual parts and equipment needed for metric conversion. Through the use of actual equipment and applied learning techniques, students master and apply the skills within a short period of time. Another employer requested that students learn key economic principles related to the operation of their auto body business. The employer was satisfied with the students' performance when they were able to apply concepts they learned about "hidden" costs of employment (i.e., marketing, customer relations, office procedures, wage negotiations, Workman's Compensation, and other aspects of business ownership).

Typically, stages 1 and 2 occur during the fall semester. Stages 3 through 6 occur in the spring semester (the nine-week school-based portion is followed by nine weeks of the work-based portion). The shift from OJT to regular employment coincides with the end of the school year or graduation of the student. For students who qualify, adult service agencies may provide postsecondary support.

Replicating the BETA Model

While the basic concept of BETA is simple, implementing the model requires training educators to understand the "dos and don'ts" of working with businesses, as well as the expectations and strategies to achieve the participation and commitment of local employers. The BETA training provides educators with skills and knowledge to create business partnership for school-to-work transition. The BETA training accomplishes the following:

- presents lessons and insights on employers' decisions to participate in business-education partnerships;
- explores strategies to conduct a market analysis of existing jobs in the community;
- identifies the role, resources, and collaborative support provided by vocational-technical education and special education;
- examines nuances of working effectively with employers and agencies;
- offers proven strategies in developing business and education partnerships into community collaboratives;
- presents specific observations and critical lessons on engaging employers in implementing a business network supporting school-to-work initiatives; and
- explores issues of program design and curriculum.

All aspects of the BETA program are appropriate for dissemination to other sites. Key strategies identified and evaluated by the U.S. Department of Education reveal relevant information and approaches to effectively link schools, business communities, and other stakeholders. Having documented the potential of the BETA program for replication, as part of a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, training procedures and content materials were developed and piloted in August, 1994. The following materials in each of the three areas were designed:

- Introduction and Awareness: Employer video, educator video, student video, and program brochures.
- Training and Program Development: Coordinator manual, curriculum guide, and administrator guide.
- Program Operation: Employer guide, educator guide, agency guide, family guide, student handbook, and student portfolio.

For a copy of the three-year independent evaluation conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, or information on availability of training to replicate the BETA model, contact Phillip Stroup, BETA 2000 Project Director, Boulder Valley School District, 6600 Arapahoe, Boulder, CO. Tel. (303) 442-5040, FAX (303) 447-5211.

The active involvement of business and industry in the education of our students is key to increasing work-based learning. Consequently, a solid school-business partnership, like the Business and Education Transition Alliance, is instrumental in preparing a better workforce.

Guidelines for Effective School-Business Partnerships

The key feature of the BETA program is a business-education partnership with both parties committed to working together and sharing responsibility for a training program that will qualify identified individuals to perform targeted jobs in the company. The following are guidelines for successful employment partnerships:

1. **Ensure mutual benefit** for employers (i.e., well-trained employees) and school or adult service agencies (i.e., technical training and job placement for students).
2. **Obtain an up-front commitment from businesses to hire** students who meet the competency standards identified by them.
3. **Mobilize a team of educators to provide employers with an orientation** on employees' learning styles, disability and reasonable accommodations, incentives, and support system.
4. **Have employers collaborate with educators** in designing the school-based curriculum, including technical and employability skills. The contextual learning approach results in students learning skills with practical application into the workplace.
5. **Conduct an evaluation** for effective management and continuous quality improvement of the business-education partnership.

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